

Presidential Address

Advancing Public Policy in Ireland: A Vision for Collaboration, Integrity, and Innovation

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Abstract: In 1847, William Nelson Hancock envisioned the civil service, academics and stakeholders coming together to address the challenges of Ireland in a post-famine period. In today's Ireland, we face a different set of challenges posed by specialisation in land ownership and in our products and services that will be exposed to digital transformations and disruptions to global trade and financial markets. In addition, we face implementing transformative goals that will lead us on a pathway to net zero carbon emissions and sustainable development. Hancock's vision remains as important as ever. By fostering collaboration, upholding integrity through open science policy and embracing public sector innovation, SSISI members can help empower the civil service and academia to drive meaningful change for people on the island of Ireland.

Keywords: all-Ireland, public policy, collaboration, integrity, innovation

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1. INTRODUCTION: ACKNOWLEDGING OUR SOCIETY'S PRESENT AND PAST

Today, I wish to share my vision for SSISI to advance public policy in Ireland through the prisms of three interdependent themes: collaboration, integrity, and innovation. As a preface to my remarks today, I would like to appropriately acknowledge the many mutual links between Queen's University Belfast and our own Society, particularly all the individuals who have distinguished both institutions. These include four of my predecessors as SSISI President:

- William Neilson Hancock - 10th President of the Society (1881-1882), and the founding Secretary of the Society. He also held an academic post at the then Queen's College.
- William Huston Dodd - 16th President of the Society (1894-1896). He was educated at the Royal Academical Institution and Queen's College, Belfast, pursued a career as a lawyer, was elected as MP for North Tyrone in 1906, and was later appointed a High Court judge.
- James Johnston Shaw - 18th President of the Society (1900-1902). An economist, lawyer, and judge, who became Queen's University Belfast's first Pro-Chancellor in 1908.
- Robert Denis Collison Black - 47th President of the Society (1983-1985). In 1945, he took up a position in the Department of Economics at Queen's. As historian of the Society, he produced the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland centenary volume, 1847-1947.

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In preparing this address, I revisited the themes explored by past presidents since I joined the society in 1992. Brendan Walsh explored labour market transformations; Aidan Punch examined marriage and family dynamics; Donal de Buitleir analysed the Nordic model; Paul Sweeney addressed declining labour shares in value added; John FitzGerald focused on vital statistics; Francis Ruane studied consumption patterns; and, Danny McCoy championed sustainable development. Each president took their respective opportunity to expound on a topic that was of profound importance to them. In this vein, my address today is shaped by a special experience that made a deep personal impression.

In 2014, I took a sabbatical in New York to work with Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs at Columbia University on a United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's initiative called the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). Its initial mandate from 2012 was to support the reviews and recommendations for the post-2015 agenda, which was finalised in an UN Secretary-General's synthesis report, which underpinned nine months of inter-governmental negotiations facilitated by the Irish and Kenyan UN Ambassadors, David Donoghue and Macharia Kamau, respectively. These negotiations included the UN Major Groups and other stakeholders that included academics, women, youth, unions, farmers and other non-governmental stakeholders. They later had a seat at the table and were empowered to make oral and write statements as well as attend and organise side events. At the end of the day, it was member states alone who agreed and signed the outcome document that became *Transforming our World, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. I represented the UN Science and Technology Community during these negotiations with a particular focus on the role of academia and the Science Policy Practice interface of the agenda.

For this address, I wish to convey my own strong interest in the science policy interface, which embodies William Nelson Hancock's original vision during his decades-long association with our Society. My experience in New York sparked my enthusiasm for the science-policy interface within SSISI itself, particularly with regard to how knowledge from policy dialogues between academics and the civil service can be translated into legislation for the public good. Encouraged by my UCD colleague Enda Murphy to pursue this as a research agenda and publish in academic journals, I sought to continue engaging in science policy interfaces at the UN, EU and at national Irish levels. I frame my remarks today through the lens of our Society, drawing on its 178-year history of fostering dialogue between academia and the civil service to improve Ireland's economic and social conditions.

In October 1847, there was a meeting in the rooms in Trinity College Dublin of the newly appointed Whately Professor of Political Economy. Professor William Neilson Hancock, an Irish economist, was the fourth holder of the Whately Professor of Political Economy at Trinity College Dublin, from 1846 to 1851. Hancock, then just 27 years of age, knew with all the certainty of youth and the confidence of early academic eminence that academic knowledge could help Ireland recover from the ravages of the ongoing famine. Alongside other like-minded contemporaries, whose knowledge and experience would be invaluable to this task, including James A. Lawson (a former Whately Professor and future Attorney General), J. Kells Ingram (a Trinity academic and polymath), G. Johnson Allman (Professor of Mathematics at Queen's College Galway), Robert Ball (a distinguished naturalist and geologist), W. Cooke Taylor (prolific author on political, economic and social matters and now a civil servant), Steward Blacker, Professor Patton, and Rev. R.M. Kennedy, they co-founded the Dublin Statistical Society.

With nineteenth-century Ireland then grappling with famine and destitution, Hancock believed academics could step beyond the ivory tower to convene public meetings and shape policy. His confidence was remarkable, and his 41 years of service - from 1847 to 1888 - set a high bar. The Society's longevity to present day is its most striking feature, thanks to members that followed Hancock's precedent. Hancock was so committed to its ideals that he served as a secretary until 1881, before serving a term as President and then remaining as a Vice-President until he died in 1888. In addition, he read no fewer than 88 papers to the Society. The Society has been replete with many other examples of such dedication. While Professor Hancock and his contemporaries in the Society have long passed away, generations since have maintained the resolve of SSISI's members to improve the economic and social conditions in Ireland by evidence-based policymaking. As Shane Whelan has recently observed "what is remarkable about the Society is not its origin but its longevity." (Whelan 2024) Indeed, a host of historical accounts of our Society have chronicled our society's impact over its lifetime. (See Millin 1919; Black 1947; Black 1988; Daly 1997; Daly 1998; Hederman-O'Brien 2007; Rankin 2011; and, Whelan 2024). In 2007, Mary Daly and Hederman O'Brien launched the digitisation of our archives, a bittersweet process that involved sacrificing physical journals to make them accessible online. This digital archive, now hosted at Trinity College, is a global resource, widely accessed by historians of all branches.

2. OUR SOCIETY AND THE POWER OF DIALOGUE

In all of these historical analyses of the dialogues within the Society, there has been discussion about the Society's impact on the economic and social life of people in Ireland. A recurring question has been whether our dialogues have influenced legislative change. Do dialogues, whose proceedings are published in a journal, actually influence

policy? Do such syntheses and public conversations have any impact at all on legislative change and on the economic and social life of the people in Ireland?

To explore one example, Ciara Whelan and I examined how the Capital Investment Advisory Committee, which included such luminaries as T. K. Whitaker, Loudon Ryan, Charles Carter, and Paddy Lynch, shaped Ireland's industrialisation. (Walsh and Whelan 2010). Whitaker and his academic advisors were regular participants in the meetings of the Society. Did presenting these ideas and papers to the Society and receiving feedback help Ireland succeed in its industrialisation policy? There is evidence to suggest that Whitaker's landmark 'First Programme for Economic Expansion', dated in November 1958 (Department of Finance 1958) had already been aired at the Society. Walsh and Whelan (2010) argue that Loudon Ryan's talks to the Society are clearly influenced by the writings of Hirschman and could be mapped onto the economic plans and industrial policy in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This shaped the future of economic growth and industrial structure in Ireland to the present day. Carter produced (with B. R. Williams) three publications for the Royal Society of Arts' science and industry committee, of which he was chairman: *Industry and Technical Progress* (1957), *Investment in Innovation* (1958), and *Science in Industry* (1959). (See Birnie and Brownlow 2023) Charles Carter's work, lauded both north and south was a strong proponent of the availability of official data that would be comparable across the island of Ireland. (See Carter and Robson 1955). To this day, Northern Ireland still lacks data that is not comparable to the south. One consequence is that this data absence has made economic, social and environmental spillovers across the border hard to manage. While the Society will find it hard to lay claim to what are the achievements of its members., it can undoubtedly be proud of its mission to bring such reformers in contact with each other to stimulate, encourage, and maybe even embolden them to pursue the debated reform. As Shane Whelan, reflecting on our Society's history, has argued that its true power lies not in claiming credit but in fostering hope and encouragement through dialogue. (Whelan 2024). Our seven annual meetings bring together academics, policymakers, and stakeholders, creating a space to test ideas and inspire a better future for Ireland.

Trying to link legislative change both north and south to the dialogues in SSISI has previously proven itself to be a difficult task. With advances in AI and other digital technologies, it may now be possible to accurately trace within digitalised official documents as well as our Journal's back catalogue. For example, a dialogue on the grocery order in SSISI took years to feed into legislative change using different terminology with influence from various stakeholders. Does that mean the dialogue is not important if it cannot easily be tracked into legislation and impact? Is it a waste of time to build capacity in staff of government and universities and engage them in dialogues, compare ideas and encourage each other to innovate and implement policy agendas? SSISI members throughout the years have discussed such matters with suggestions to improve the economic and social conditions in Ireland in some way. Our meetings use official data sources and evidence-based analysis for policy dialogues, which are then open to debate with representatives of various sectors of society. This embodies the essential core of what these SSISI's public meetings and publications have been aimed at achieving. Such ideas can then inform and influence research conducted by the civil service and parliamentary committees that shape legislative change and thereby impact on people's lives for the better.

The entire concept of such public meetings and dialogues has underwritten the rationale that established the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). In 2012, both the UN Secretary-General and Advisor Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University felt that legal and academic oversight would be needed to review all the stakeholder consultations recommendations during a three-year period. With UN members involved in agreeing treaty settlements, there was a necessity for official data and peer reviewed science that needed academics and legal experts to support such processes. After an agreement was reached in September 2015, SDSN continues in its role with the mandate that academia can help convene partnerships to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) throughout all levels of governance such as within universities or corporations or within city, national or regional or global public entities. With there being serious global challenges happening with climate change, society, technology and geopolitics, there is an important role for academia and practitioners to stress the need for dialogues and the capability to actually distil the data and draft recommendations and interact with government to actually implement the recommendations. The mindset evokes that of our Society's founders to serve as an independent convenor of dialogues that could convene policymakers, civil society and stakeholders to design and create improved public policy.

As a proposed prescription to maintain our Society's aims into the future, let me outline three pillars for advancing public policy that SSISI could promote in the design of future public policy on the island of Ireland: collaboration, integrity, and innovation.

3. THE COLLABORATION PILLAR

SSISI was founded in 1847 during a time of acute societal crisis. The academic community responded by forming a stakeholder council to explore a whole-of-society approach to finding solutions that would aid public policy during the crisis. As noted earlier, there is a contemporary parallel with such a model in my current role in the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) which supports intergovernmental agenda-setting, implementation strategies, and follow-up and review mechanisms - initiated to address the global challenges we face today. Such motivations clearly replicate the founding resolution moved by Thomas Larcom, when our Society was established on 23rd November 1847, that 'Our career is to collect and methodise the materials of improvement. Our Pole Star is Truth.' (See Millin 1920).

In 2015, the UN 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015) empowered this idea by setting up the Major Group system. This gave rights to the UN Major Group and other stakeholders (made up of the academia, corporates, farmers, unions, women, youth groups, local government and other stakeholders) to attend meetings and shape the inter-governmental dialogues. Governments realised the only way to have a substantial reform was for everyone in all walks of life to buy into the policies. The most politically acceptable and least costly pathway to reform can come from a whole-of-society response to crisis - with a momentum driven by the understanding that we are all in it together and can all be part of the solution.

While we are no longer in 1847 crisis mode, we are not in a stable place either. Ireland faces a challenging high-risk environment in our own time. We have a concentrated land-use ownership that is skewed and also have a relatively narrow range of internationally traded products and services that leaves us vulnerable to shocks in global financial markets and supply chains. Although digital and green transformations are already underway, the fallout of geopolitical conflicts (including tariffs) could have even more serious consequences for our value chains. SSISI's response will be to continue maintaining its stakeholder membership to address and advise on modern-day and future challenges and to address the acute contemporary challenges Ireland is facing in accordance with our continuing mission.

One significant outcome of the COVID pandemic was the increased attendance at Society meetings online. SSISI is an all-Ireland institution, and members from both jurisdictions were able to attend all meetings and contribute. Recently, we have seen more attendance and papers from Northern Ireland than in previous years. Going forward, it is important to ensure that more people based in Northern Ireland are appointed to our Council. The all-Ireland traditions in this society will grow in importance as we tackle global challenges. Academics and the civil service working closer together - North and South - is always beneficial for people, business, and nature. Indeed, continuing what we have done for years, but with the advantage of digital platforms, we can increase participation and impact both sides of the border, and we should remain a hybrid society maintaining wide representation on our Council.

Just as collaboration was at the heart of our society's mission in Hancock's time, SSISI to this day continues to address contemporary challenges in Ireland by fostering stakeholder collaboration that focuses on strengthening the bureaucratic side of government to enhance legislative impact; promoting the use of official statistics for robust policy analysis; leveraging digital tools to improve the science-policy interface; adopting all-island approaches to public policy; and, empowering young public servants in economic, social, and environmental domains. In Ireland, we face challenges like economic specialisation, global supply chain disruptions, and the transition to net zero. These require whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, with interoperable data and cross-border dialogue. Our Society's model - public meetings, open discussions, and published papers - offers a blueprint for such collaboration.

There has been a discernible disconnect between the civil service and academia as a partnership in policy or in pathways to legislative change. We observe more sub-contracting to an increasing number of government agencies, consultants and political advisers. Core civil service reports and recommendations seem to be competing with this side of 'unofficial' government, which the civil service has to recognise and take seriously. In the US, criticism of the civil service has engendered an argument for a 'chainsaw' to reduce the bureaucratic side of government. The civil service has to get back its agency and realise it has the correct standards and capabilities to deliver for the public good, particularly on the social and environmental side of policy. The civil service can do long-term planning using trusted data and modelling that is independent of political cycles and lobby groups. Currently, the civil service, instead of setting agendas, is left to tidy up or firefight ill-fated policy when it should actually be in the driving seat.

As to recommending how the bureaucratic side of government can empower itself to drive long-term planning for the public good, the key is to reach out to the academic community and civil society at large who have resources

and capacities to help them drive the legislative agenda. This is the essence of what our Society has endeavoured to do for 178 years, but the task is proving more difficult in today's policymaking environment. At the end of the day, it is the public value and public service that is actually going to drive good public policy, particularly if you have to implement ten- to twenty-year plans that aim to care for people and the environment both nationally and globally. Hancock's idea was for public servants to use whole-of-government approaches, coordinating across different departments, in addition to coordinating with stakeholders to comprise a whole society approach that serves as a key instrument of public policy. SSISI exhibits this through the simplicity of seven public meetings a year, with the council selecting the topics of public policy to discuss in a public forum to facilitate an enriching dialogue that provides powerful insights that hopefully translate themselves into transformative public policy change.

The benefits from all-Ireland participation cannot only be realised with civil servants, statisticians, and academics talking with each other to overcome wider issues such as tariffs and migration but also in best addressing pathways to net zero, biodiversity loss and farming productivity. Regardless of what governance scenario emerges in the future, it is imperative that we have north-south-dialogues and are able to share data and ideas as well as frame our public policies to be as interoperable as possible. Our ever digitalising age will make such cooperation easier, and so governments have to be capable of owning and running digital platforms, the necessary licensing and applications, and any data and information that derive from them. Any government that does not drive digital public transformation will not be able to transform governance or to drive policy and thus will be less likely to transform society, the economy and the environment into a sustainable future.

4. THE INTEGRITY PILLAR

The Society aims to connect academia with government and other stakeholders to bolster policymaking that prioritises public welfare. Additionally, SSISI emphasises information integrity, advocating for trust in official data and peer-reviewed research amid rising disinformation. Public dialogues founded on official data provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (and its predecessors) have always been key to our Society. A challenge for the CSO and the Society will be to push for data on land-use across all dimensions of sustainable development. There are significant gaps in environmental data, particularly regarding environmental goals and biodiversity. Integrating economic, social, and environmental policy will require interoperable data for effective policy dialogues, modelling, and planning. This might seem challenging, but new digital tools are emerging to address this gap.

A related point in protecting the public interest is the role that the digital revolution can play in the sphere of information integrity. Using official data and peer-reviewed scholarship should create trust in the work of communities like this, and more people will be turning to libraries, academic research, and CSO data in the analysis of policy issues. Information integrity and validation will become more important as the scope for disinformation grows on social media and other sources of news.

Since 2007, the Society has adopted a digital archiving and publication approach known as 'diamond publishing and engagements.' To maintain freedom in both the creation and access to content, the Society must remain a volunteer community, as exhibited in the work of the Council, its officers, and submitting authors. We may not have known it at the time, but we were ahead of our time when we digitized the journal, archived in a library repository, and developed an overlay journal with good discoverable metadata, free access, and transparency in use. Science Europe and many other UN bodies are only now pushing for diamond open access publishing and community engagement that are catching up with SSISI's early adoption.

Globally, scholars can face eye-watering fees to publish their papers. However, all contributions to SSISI are published for free, encouraging members to share ideas and discussions using our template, which we referee and archive ourselves. The Journal's contribution to the global knowledge commons is underwritten by its free and easily accessible platform as well as by following best practice, whereas many journals have paywalls through charges to contributors, libraries, and readers. While the Journal is part of a global movement on diamond publishing, diamond engagements apply across the Journal's operations, with the Council and many allies willing to write and referee the papers. We currently have an editorial team that can format and archive the publication in the TARA digital archive of TCD. In addition, we can track use across universities and government departments worldwide. Looking forward, our diamond engagement will be further enhanced with innovations from AI and other technologies, which will help optimise journal metadata, access, and dissemination.

One particular challenge for the Society in undertaking the science-policy interface is the radical change in the mapping of the Irish State since the 1950s. A few years ago, the UCD Geary Institute hosted a SDG stakeholder forum on child poverty and mapped out the government departments, government agencies, research institutes, and NGOs dealing with children in Ireland. (See Murphy and Walsh et al. 2019). There were over seventy entities

involved. In some ways, the role of departments is being hollowed out or subcontracted to agencies and consultancy companies. If SSISI dialogues are to continue to effectively influence policy, it must negotiate the more intricate structures beneath and between departments. However, digital transformation can help us disseminate recommendations into complex institutions and address the need to integrate society, environment, and economic thinking into policy agendas. Digital governance frameworks will allow us to manage the complexity of government institutions that are currently outdated in design. The Society will be able to use innovations in digital governance to engage more effectively at the science-policy interface.

To address policy across social, economic, and environmental dimensions, both the data we use and the modelling we apply will need to change. Advances in AI will make such analyses easier and will also enhance our ability to engage in the science-policy interface in complex systems. Our papers should be sent to the set of stakeholders working directly or indirectly on current issues. SSISI will need to do more than simply placing the paper in the journal archive and expecting policymakers to find it. AI can help take the paper to those who would benefit from it. It is high time to hone a new dissemination strategy to better integrate science with policy.

Integrity in public policy demands open data, open science, and open educational resources. The UN's Global Digital Compact, signed in 2024, marked a milestone in governing digital assets, emphasising public ownership of data infrastructure. Librarians, with tools like DSpace, demonstrate how to archive and share digital resources transparently. In academia, we teach students to verify sources and use official data - a principle that must guide policy. Without accessible, interoperable data, we cannot model the interplay of society, economy, and environment. Norway may be an exception in this regard, but most countries, including Ireland, lack the data infrastructure needed for effective sustainable planning. Our Society, with its roots in statistical rigour, can advocate for better data practices. As a corollary, the open science movement also matters as research funded by taxpayers should be freely accessible, not paywalled by commercial journals. Knowledge equity ensures that the global south can benefit from our work, such as in fostering global cooperation on issues like child labour or environmental impact.

The first global digital governance document, the UN Digital Compact, was signed in 2024. This was the first time governments had an agreement on how to govern digital assets, infrastructures, and applications. Corporates tend to be quite enthusiastic to take ownership of digital assets but are reluctant to invest in digital infrastructures and in the interoperability of government data. If we want good public policy at home and abroad, the most effective path is under state ownership and buttressed upon their own digital infrastructures. Digital librarians in public libraries are way ahead of the private sector in this regard. With their expertise in the preservation of digital products, they possess the know-how to license them and to apply the necessary handles and metadata to optimise archiving and searchability as well as their traceability and to make them free and useable. If you want a digital public highway that is completely interoperable to transfer all your digital data, education resources and research then the librarians already know the best practices. Indeed, I am very convinced that actually the public sector potentially can have this knowledge available for everyday use. Furthermore, libraries give us the correct way to ensure information integrity. That the data and sources we use must be findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable is the mandate we should abide by, and these principles should apply throughout the public sector so as to underwrite good public policy. When we are thinking about our economic policies, we need to measure their impact on households and impact on environmental issues such as pollution and biodiversity based on reliable and real-time data to address these and other challenges. Company accounts can be good but are not easily linked to household surveys or satellite photographs on forestry and biodiversity. Norway is one of the rare current exceptions that has fit-for-purpose data to complement the interaction of society, economy and environment. In fact, there tends to be always a policy involving a technology and behavioural change with wide-ranging positive synergies. We must collect the data and be able to share it in an accessible and free manner in order to enable everyone from government, company, to household to plan effectively.

SSISI has consistently relied on the CSO and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency for data. Can present data allow effective comparison across both jurisdictions? Will such data be fit-for-purpose to model environmental and societal outcomes? There is work to collate this data and archive it with integrity under first best principles for public good use - a task that for the civil service and academics to both address. Without open data, science and education resources, we cannot have a whole-of-society approach to public policy. This is why we need a policy on property rights over digital assets, with every piece of knowledge created with taxpayer funding being openly licenced and not handed over to commercial entities to profit from. Furthermore, there is a propensity for gatekeeping, whether in who can contribute this knowledge as well as who can access, use or repurpose it again, especially where commercial paywalls are applied. This is a fundamental challenge that must be overcome if one wishes to coordinate more effectively on matters such as global supply, child labour concerns or environmental impacts.

Recognising the significance of open data, science and education resources is fundamental not just in the bureaucratic side of government but also to legislators, who must be equipped to scrutinise and assess what lobbyists and other political interests may advocate that may run counter to positions taken either in science or by different stakeholders. Thus, the importance of integrity in official data and public policy recommendations has consistently underwritten our Society's dialogues, and we must not be shy in extolling this principle.

5. THE INNOVATION PILLAR

Innovation in public policy may sound unconventional, but it is essential. T.K. Whitaker's past advisory committee once crafted a bold plan to shift Ireland toward export-oriented industrialisation. Today, we need similar visions to address climate change, biodiversity, and the SDGs. It underscores the need for public sector capacity to manage digital assets and develop human capital, promoting state ownership and innovation for the global public good. Governments must engage with academia and the private sector to innovate for long-term achievement of goals. In Ireland, our Society can facilitate these dialogues, ensuring the civil service retains agency over policy, rather than ceding ground to the short-term interests of corporates or lobby groups.

The bureaucratic side of government in Ireland needs to strengthen its impact on legislation. Since the recognised impact of Whitaker, the influence of policy advisors, lobby groups, and consultants has served to dilute the effectiveness of government departments on policy uptake by Dáil committees. During COVID, we saw academia and government reconnecting to address the challenges of testing and vaccination programmes. Going forward, the Society can reconnect members more directly with the bureaucratic side of government and endow it with the capacity to impact the legislator more directly. This is important not only for good policy but also for policymaking that takes account of the welfare of people and nature more broadly. Interest groups that exert influence over legislators are liable to undermine democracy. A strong public sector is more likely to impose a strong public interest in how policy agendas are established.

One final point that bears repeating as addressed in the UN Global Digital Compact (see <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact>) is the need for the public sector to develop the capacity to own digital assets, run digital infrastructure, and manage applications. We cannot allow private companies to have exclusive control over these, with the state merely serving as a regulator. While having rules and principles is important, the state must also have in-house capacity. SSISI runs its journal and digital archive in-house under public ownership. Related to this is the importance of developing public sector human capital. The sector needs to attract the best people and be capable of using digital resources effectively, innovating with them for the global public good.

The Society is committed to investing in public sector human capital. We demonstrate a great deal of respect for young public servants through the Barrington Prize. Looking forward and mindful of the Society's original motto inspired by Thomas Larcom:- 'Our Pole Star is Truth', we should encourage younger public servants to work together, innovate, think about the future, and have the confidence to drive important policy agendas forward for the benefit of all in Ireland, Europe, and globally. In this, as has been observed of previous times, we should ensure as then that our Society's Journal continues to serve 'as a substantial repository of scholarly productions that shed significant light on the evolving synergy of publishing and social science and their contribution to the flow of knowledge during critical phases of Ireland's social and economic history.' (Rankin 2011).

6. CONCLUSION

This Society was just recently briefed on the lack of effective public capital expenditures on roads, housing and data infrastructures, which are not meeting current needs. Why are the civil service, academia, and stakeholders not capable of making the case that this spending should take priority over short-run political interests? Actors from the public sector, academia, and the private sector need to come together and think about the transformations that are necessary to go on pathways to sustainability. Through dialogue, participants gain the confidence and agency to advance change, developing the capacity to model outcomes, provide legislators with recommendations for sustainable pathways, and expose the narrow interests of lobby groups. In 1847, William Neilson Hancock envisioned academics and stakeholders coming together to address Ireland's challenges. Today, as we face transformative goals like net zero and sustainable development, his vision remains vital. By fostering collaboration, upholding integrity through open data, and embracing innovation, our society can empower the civil service and academia to drive meaningful change. Ireland needs to undertake very serious more medium- to long-term transformations. The vision of SSISI is an example of what success could look like and what you have to institutionalise and empower in the workings of government and academic to drive successful public policymaking in Ireland.

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DISCUSSION

Katy Hayward: One of the ambitions I have in teaching at Queen's is to enable students to exercise their sociological imaginations towards a grasp of 'Ireland'. In so doing, C. Wright Mills' exhortation from 1959 remains apt: 'It is now the social scientist's foremost political and intellectual task - for here the two coincide - to make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference.' Some four generations on, that 'uneasiness and indifference' still oppresses - and conceiving it in sociological terms is still empowering.

For sociological practice is both a practical and a normative pursuit, and one which the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (SSISI) embodies. Mary E. Daly wrote a wonderful article on SSISI in 1997 to mark its 150th anniversary, titled *The Spirit of Earnest Enquiry*. In it she notes how 'the papers presented to the Society have been concerned with practical problems, such as crime, poverty and economic progress, and by a common concern with the condition of Ireland.' Both such concerns are very evident in Professor Walsh's address this evening. In this brief response, I will focus on this point, with his exhortation for what might be termed 'research impact' or 'knowledge transfer' in mind.

Let's begin with Professor Walsh's use of the term 'allies' when referring to researchers' relationships with civil servants and wider civil society. We don't find allies everywhere; we certainly don't find them in every civil servant. The question, then, is: what gives and makes us allies, i.e. on what grounds do we forge such relationships? It must be at least partly on that common concern for the condition of the society in which we live.

Following on from that, the alliances that can be beneficial for Irish society depend on mutual respect for the value of scientific expertise as a means of bettering the condition of Ireland. Meaningful alliances - especially among those who would otherwise be relative strangers - depend on building relationships of trust and confidence.

Sometimes this requires low-key and discreet contact that no one will know about. Being able to use a public voice is a privilege we have as researchers and academics; we need to be able to use that in a way that respects that quiet trust we have fostered with our allies. And, to be clear, these alliances are neither ideological nor political; their sole purpose is to enhance our understanding and to better utilise expertise - be it academic, policy or practitioner. In this sense, such relationships centre on the privilege of being willing to pose difficult questions to each other that are not otherwise being asked.

A second condition that relates to the need for such alliances is an awareness of the limitations of institutions. My research interest in the process of the UK's exit from the EU allowed me to observe at close hand where the distortion of truth in the public sphere came to corrode ethics in the professional sphere, specifically in the sense of what civil servants ended up being asked not only to facilitate but to rationalise. It was a sobering lesson about the fragility of democratic norms and how easily, in the absence of knowledge, information can be used to mislead. It was, more broadly, a reminder that we must not take anything for granted. The unthinkable can happen, partly because upstanding people within the most lauded of public institutions can be required to do what would have been unconscionable only the day before. We may be glad that, up to this point in recent history, civil servants in the Republic of Ireland have, by and large, escaped being put in such an invidious position. But we should act as if we expect it to happen, and I most certainly expect it to happen again in the UK. Trends of corrosion leave fissures of weakness that can be reopened with the lightest touch.

It is not only the institutions of the state that we should tend to carefully; we must be very conscious of the limitations of the institution of the University. The neo-liberalisation of the University, which Professor Walsh touched on, and the commodification of information (in place of the nurturing of knowledge) leaves universities quite susceptible to manipulation and to (self-)silencing. We have seen all too vividly in the United States in the past few months where this goes. The mere anticipation of the state's abuse of power has led universities to be willing servants of their own moral and political redundancy. But that is not the focus of my remarks any more than of Professor Walsh's. Instead, my key point is to stress how important the independence of SSISI is. In some ways, the fact that you are aware of your vulnerability is a power because it means that you have the *will* to be together. Without this, in universities and the civil service, complacency can quickly erode cohesion and even public coherence.

The fact that SSISI actively facilitates 'empowering conversations' is a perfect tonic for the malady identified, for it furthers the quest for the polestar of truth. In doing so, cherish your independence as a Society. I have become increasingly conscious that although academic freedom is a wonderful gift in and (I would suggest) for wider society beyond the university, it does not do much for one *inside* it. The freedom and independence that SSISI has, not least by being together as a voluntary coalition, is not a weakness but a timely strength.

Finally, Professor Walsh mentioned the word 'dialogue' several times this evening. One of the topics I've come to research in recent times is the matter of what Artificial Intelligence might mean for the public role of the university. Exploring that has been a challenge in not only intellectual but professional terms; yet the lodestar I have come to fix my eyes upon is the notion of 'discernment'. Putting it very simply, the machine is unable to discern only to guess on the basis of probability. We humans possess a great gift in the capacity for discernment, and what is perhaps most important of all is the fact that we cannot possess such a gift as individuals. Instead, it is found through engagement and dialogue. Only through such interaction can we ensure that knowledge and insight grow.

Professor Walsh mentioned the integrity of data - which is crucial - but we must also consider what integrity we have as thinking human beings. We need to remain clear-eyed about the risk posed to both forms of integrity when it comes to Artificial Intelligence. There is no accounting for intent or truthfulness in the cognitive process of machine learning: a process that can blithely wither data integrity as it goes and dampen intellectual integrity where it is thoughtlessly applied.

So, in response to Professor Walsh's rallying address, I am afraid I have merely only been able to offer something of an incomplete response that concurs with his view as to the depth of the challenge and recognises the unique necessity of bodies such as the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland being able to rise to it. In so doing, perhaps it is fitting to conclude where I began: to acknowledge that 178 years of an intentional quest and respect for truth, combined with an immovable concern for the condition of Ireland, is undeniably remarkable and potentially salvatory. *Vivat, crescat, floreat!*